

[I sent this to about a dozen members of the organizing board of the first COPA (Conference on Political Assassinations) that took place in Washington DC in October 1994. The only person who ever replied was Michael Parenti. I published it in [Looking for the Enemy](#) (Addendum 2), and also in [Chomsky, Prouty and Me](#) (cf. Ch. 1994.10.20)].

An Open Letter to John Newman

Oct. 20, 1994

Dear John,

I sent a letter a couple of days ago to John Judge and Gary Aguilar (but intended for all members of the governing board) urging the creation of an electronic network (mailing list) whereby we could continue the public discussion that began at the conference. Until we have such a mechanism, I'm sending this by snail mail to a few people who might be interested (and whose addresses I happen to have), and of course I'm hoping there will be some feedback. An e-mailing list will make this kind of exchange much simpler--and cheaper.

This will be a bit confrontational, but I hope you will understand that I don't mean it personally or disrespectfully. The first question concerns your intelligence background. Can you say anything to make those of us who suspect high-level government complicity in the assassinations (about half the general population, in fact) less suspicious of someone like yourself, who after spending 20 years in military intelligence now purports to lead the fight for "full disclosure"? As a former intelligence officer, are you not still bound by secrecy oaths that would prevent you from revealing or publishing material that some intelligence agency or other deems damaging to "national security"? If you do not do so now, if you overstep the bounds can you not be forced to submit everything you write and say for clearance by intelligence officials? Is it not logical to suspect that a former intelligence officer might still be working for the government? Would it not be ideal for the government to have one of its own leading an assault on government secrecy, so that this assault could be steered in less harmful directions than might otherwise be the case? Is it not also possible that a 20-year intelligence veteran might be more easily convinced than others that playing such a role is fully compatible with notions of "patriotic service"?

I'll give you an example of the kind of remark that does not allay these suspicions. You said during your talk on Oswald's 201 file something to the effect that at the end of this investigation we might find "not an institutional conspiracy, but perhaps a conspiracy on the part of some elements within the Agency." Why do you think so? What makes you think a crime and coverup as massive as the JFK assassination is more likely to have been carried out by a few individuals rather than by an institution such as the CIA? To me, this "renegade CIA" theory is as implausible as the Lone Nut theory--just one more propaganda model or phase of the coverup. Peter Scott's phase analysis ([Deep Politics and the Death of JFK](#), Berkeley: Univ. of Calif., 1993, p. 38) can be extended as follows:

Phase 1: The KGB (or Castro) did it.

Phase 2: Oswald did it.

Phase 3: The Mafia (+ anti-Castro Cubans) did it.

Phase 4: Renegade CIA agents (+ Mafia + Cubans) did it.

Phase 5: The CIA (+ their allies in the rest of the government and society at large) did it.

The government and the mass media now seem to be somewhere between Phase 2 and Phase 3. Phase 4 is waiting in the wings, and it seems from your remark that you expect its entrance soon, perhaps as the result of your own work.

Phase 5, which in my opinion is the truth, will be further postponed until enough time has passed that the future government will be able to plausibly dissociate itself from the powers-that-were in 1963. There are signs already that the CIA as an institution may be on the way out, and if that happens it will make Phase 5 easier to introduce. The public will be all too readily convinced that by-gones are by-gones and that their current government and institutions have nothing to do with those that presided over the coup d'état in 1963.

But we would do well to remember the words of Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, one of the first directors of the CIA, who told the investigative committee appointed by Kennedy to investigate the Bay of Pigs operation:

When you are at war, Cold War if you like, you must have an amoral agency which can operate secretly and which does not have to give press conferences...I think that so much publicity has been given to CIA that the covert work might have to be put under another roof...It's time we take the bucket of slop and put another cover over it (Operation Zapata, Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1981, pp. 276-277).

So they were considering putting the shit bucket elsewhere already in 1961. Who knows where it was in 1963, or where it is now, or how many buckets there are? This is why the term "CIA" should be taken as a metaphor for the larger secret criminal networks of power that pervade not only the government but also private enterprise. But you have to start somewhere, and since at least according to the overt structure of the government the CIA is the central shit bucket, that seems the best place to start.

The CIA is, after all, an institutionalized conspiracy. The Directorate of Operations (formerly "Plans") is by any reasonable definition the Department of Conspiracy ("two or more people planning secretly to do bad or illegal things"). It is part of an institution in the executive branch of the government, which makes both the CIA and the government, to some extent, institutionalized conspiracies. As are all governments, for what governments do not secretly plan to do bad or illegal things at some time or other? So much for the false and counterproductive distinction between "structural" or "institutional" analysis vs. "conspiracy" theory (e.g., Michael Albert, Z magazine), as Michael Parenti eloquently pointed out at the conference. So much, too, or so one would hope, for your apparent willingness to exonerate an institution which is by definition conspiratorial, while looking for "renegades" within that institution.

To put it a little differently, do you really think that "renegades" within the CIA could have pulled off the public execution of the president and controlled the official investigations and press coverage forever after? To modify that a bit, do you think "renegades" could have done it and then been protected forever after by government officials, institutions, and virtually the entire "free press"--merely because all these people made individual decisions to cover their asses concerning some aspect of the matter they inadvertently participated in?

To see how much this strains the credulity of any but the Truest Believers in the purity and goodness of the US government, try substituting "KGB" for "CIA." Does it sound reasonable to suspect "renegade" KGB agents of pulling off the assassination and the coverup, and at the same time to exonerate the KGB as an institution, and the Soviet government as a whole? If there was indeed evidence of KGB involvement, do you think for a minute that any American would stop to make this distinction between "renegade KGB," "KGB," and "the Soviet government"? Certainly not. And why not? Because the Soviets are (were) the enemy. It is nothing more than our naive belief that our government cannot possibly be our

enemy that allows us to rationalize in this way. Eliminate the initial premise ("Uncle Sam is a good guy") and the "renegade CIA" theory appears--correctly--as naive and preposterous as the "renegade KGB" theory.

Perhaps you do not realize just how deeply suspicious many of us have become of our government. That 81% figure that Dan Alcorn cited of people who "mistrust" the government hardly scratches the surface, in my opinion. (Furthermore, I don't think this is necessarily an unhealthy state of affairs: are we not supposed to mistrust government? That is what Thoreau teaches us, at least, and history too.) We, especially a group such as the one assembled in COPA, are so accustomed to the "string 'em along and jerk 'em around" strategy of the US government that we have learned to think in ways that government propagandists eagerly dismiss as "paranoid," but which we know are quite realistic.

Let me give you an example of such a scenario --"paranoid" by mass media standards but not far-fetched at all to me -- where you, willy nilly, fit in quite neatly. Time Warner, the biggest propaganda machine in history, produced the Stone film (JFK). This is in itself a wonder, since I think JFK can safely be called the most potentially revolutionary film ever made, although Time Warner can hardly be assumed to be in the business of fomenting revolution. They also published your book (JFK and Vietnam, NY: Warner Books, 1992), which is supposedly the basis of the main thesis of the film--that JFK was killed because he was threatening to withdraw from Vietnam. Then, in addition to the shallow but widespread (and no doubt orchestrated) media attack on the film, the most prestigious elements on the "radical left," led by Alexander Cockburn and Noam Chomsky, attacked both the film and your book by showing (I'm afraid correctly) that the only evidence for your thesis -- that JFK secretly planned to withdraw regardless of the military situation -- is anecdotal. Thus the end effect of your book was to provide a straw man--an extremely speculative thesis--which the most astute critics on the left (and I suppose elsewhere, but these are the ones I pay attention to) promptly demolished, and along with it the potential political impact of the film.

The point is that if this was a managed scenario, it could not have been more successful. The discussion of the (possible) connection between the assassination and the Vietnam War, which should have exploded in the American public consciousness like a nuclear bomb, was over before it began. It has now devolved to an academic historical question between those who believe you and those who believe Chomsky. Cui bono? Could it be that both you and Chomsky were cleverly (and hopefully unwittingly) seduced into playing your parts in this scenario?

The problem is that you, Chomsky, Peter Scott, and everyone else I've read have skipped over the one most important and undeniable fact in this matter: the assessment of the military situation in Vietnam changed radically--was reversed--after the assassination. Chomsky makes this point very clearly in Rethinking Camelot (Boston: South End, 1993, pp. 91-93), although he fails to recognize its importance. He is too busy trying to refute your thesis about JFK's secret intentions. This is the wrong debate. The documentary record is perfectly clear that JFK was planning to withdraw on the assumption (not "condition," as Chomsky insists) of success. The point of departure for reasonable debate should be: When did the optimism become pessimism (which in turn caused the reversal of the withdrawal policy)? Then the question and speculation as to whether this change was coincidental can begin. Instead, we have everyone discussing a quite different (and unanswerable) question: What were JFK's secret intentions and would he have withdrawn regardless of the military situation? And even this question jumps the gun. It should be: Would the intelligence consensus on the military situation have been reversed had JFK lived?

I agree with you and Peter Scott (and Schlesinger) that 273 reversed 263, and I also suspect that JFK could not have been stupid enough to think we were winning the war or that it was winnable, so my speculation about what he would have done is the same as yours. But as I said, this is not, or should not be, the issue. The issue is when the assumption of military

success changed, and when the withdrawal policy changed accordingly. Chomsky is actually much clearer on these issues than you are, despite his thesis. He says the CIA and the other intelligence agencies began their radical and retrospective reassessment two days after the assassination. This should have raised the obvious question of why it took the CIA five months to realize they were losing the war instead of winning it, but Chomsky doesn't ask, so we must assume he takes this as coincidence.

You, on the other hand, give a more muddled picture of the intelligence consensus at the time of the assassination. Despite the almost total lack of documentation regarding what happened at the Honolulu conference on Nov. 20, you seem to argue that the change from optimism to pessimism occurred on that day:

The upshot of the Honolulu meeting, then, was that the shocking deterioration of the war effort was presented in detail to those assembled, along with a plan to widen the war, while the 1,000-man withdrawal was turned into a meaningless paper drill (p. 435).

"Upshot" is a vague term. Do you mean immediately or within the following days or weeks? You say Lodge's assessment of the situation was "contradictory" and you gloss over his overall judgment that it was "hopeful" (p. 431), whereas FRUS is quite clear about this in a passage you do not quote:

Ambassador Lodge described the outlook for the immediate future of Vietnam as hopeful ... Finally, as regards all US programs--military, economic, psychological--we should continue to keep before us the goal of setting dates for phasing out US activities and turning them over to the Vietnamese; and these dates, too, should be looked at again in the light of the new political situation [after the assassination of Diem]. The date mentioned in the McNamara-Taylor statement of October 2 on US military withdrawal had--and is still having--a tonic effect ("Memorandum of Discussion at the Special Meeting on Vietnam, Honolulu," Foreign Relations of the United States, Vietnam, 1961-1963, Vol. 4, p. 608-610).

Thus your conclusions about the "upshot" of the Honolulu conference seem unwarranted and in fact misleading.

If we follow your lead, we have JFK secretly engineering withdrawal under the pretense of success, then seeing this pretense dropped on Nov. 20 (was this good or bad for his secret plan?), then presumably about to sign a draft of 273 which is, however, significantly different from the version LBJ signed. The problem with this is not just that it is all speculation, as Chomsky says. More importantly, it confuses the crucial question of when the intelligence consensus changed. If it changed on Nov. 20, as you imply, then we can speculate ad infinitum as to whether and when Bundy informed JFK, what JFK's reaction was, etc. Where does that leave us? With the minute differences in language between draft 273 and final 273 as the only hint of discontinuity between JFK and LBJ's Vietnam policy--a very weak argument indeed. Of course, none of this really matters, since there is no evidence that JFK had any idea what happened in Honolulu, much less changed his policy as a result, but it fuels the false debate.

It is far more important to establish and emphasize what Chomsky presents correctly but ignores, and what you seem to misrepresent: the fact that the intelligence assessment and the withdrawal policy both changed radically after Nov. 22. Chomsky would have to agree with this--if we could get him to stop playing word games with the phrase "withdrawal policy"--because he cites the documentary evidence for it himself. Once this fact is established, we can then engage in a more speculative debate about whether the assassination and the subsequent assessment/policy change were merely coincidental or not. I would like to hear your reprise on this.

Since COPA is putting a lot of faith into what I cynically call the "paper chase" (which I will help with if I can but have no faith in at all), I want to add a word of warning. Government documents are not sacred, any more than government autopsy photographs, X-rays, etc. are. We have every right and reason to doubt the authenticity of government documents. For example, I doubt the authenticity of Bundy's draft of NSAM 273. It was declassified on January 31, 1991, by which time government agents were surely well aware of what Stone was up to. How very convenient that when the film came out in December, promulgating the explosive thesis (not new, but new to the general public) that 273 reversed 263, there was a draft of 273 to thoroughly confuse the issue: Did Bundy write it for Kennedy or for Johnson (i.e., was Bundy in on the coup)? Does draft 273 contradict 263, and if so does this mean JFK would have reversed his own withdrawal policy? Does draft 273 differ significantly from the final version? Apart from general obfuscation, the most obvious effect that the entrance of this document had on the discussion that the film engendered was to undermine Peter Scott's 1972 thesis of the discontinuity between 263 and 273 (e.g., for Chomsky, although he had never been convinced by Scott's argument anyway, despite having published it in Vol. 5 of the Gravel Pentagon Papers). After all, the government had had 19 years to think about how to handle Scott's disturbing theory, and what better time to release that draft than just before the film came out?

One last point. You may recall that when I talked to you briefly at the reception before the conference began, I asked you how you felt about Colby's endorsement of your book (jacket blurb). It seemed quite strange to me that the CIA's Chief of the Far East Division from 1962-67 should feel so positively about a book that, to me at least, implicated the CIA along with the rest of the military-industrial-intelligence complex in the murder of the president. You seemed surprised at my question, as if the CIA had nothing to do with Vietnam policy and therefore could not have been part of a coup intended to reverse the withdrawal plan. But it is well known that DCI John McCone was a superhawk on Vietnam before and after the assassination, and I hardly think Colby was any different, despite whatever he might say in his memoirs, which I will certainly not waste my time reading.

On re-reading your book, I can see why Colby was pleased with your treatment of him and the Agency. They emerge virtually unscathed. The brunt of your attack falls on MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) and the military brass. But isn't it accurate to say that MACV was the CIA, at least until the Marines landed in April 1965? On pp. 434-5, quoting Colby himself, you even imply that Colby was opposed to escalation in November 1963, and that after Honolulu "the military started the planning and activity that would escalate finally to full-scale air attacks" against the North, although Colby "never thought this would work."

I haven't heard even the most prostrate apologist for the CIA contend that there was anything but a hawkish consensus in the Agency for the war until 1965 at the earliest (cf. John Ranelagh, The Agency, NY: Touchstone, 1987, p. 417). Will you have us believing that Colby was arguing against escalation at the end of 1963?

I think most of us are aware of the CIA's Jekyll (Intelligence) and Hyde (Operations) tactics, whereby Hyde's covert maneuverings can be hidden and denied behind the relatively overt and supposedly well-intentioned face of Dr. Jekyll. This tactic is certainly used by the other intelligence "services" as well. And of course Dr. Jekyll says many different things, sometimes contradictory, and very likely the exact opposite of what Mr. Hyde is actually doing. Thus in reconstructing history, one can always choose among conflicting intelligence estimates and advice to argue that X or Y faction in the so-called "intelligence community," which of course includes the military, were the bad guys and the others the good guys. Your choice seems to be that CIA were the good guys and MACV, or specifically the military honchos (Harkins, Taylor, perhaps McNamara) were the bad guys.

This sounds very similar to the "renegade" theory of the assassination, this time applied to the larger crime of Vietnam: it wasn't the CIA or "the intelligence community" or even "the military," but just a few "renegade" military honchos who pulled it all off. I can't buy into this, for the same reasons I've already discussed. And the CIA would be the last institution I would attempt to exonerate, not the first. The job of the Central Intelligence Agency, as I understand it, is to establish the consensus and present this to the President, who after all has to listen to somebody. So I find it ludicrous to assert that the CIA (as an institution, regardless of various stray voices within the institution) ever did anything but push as hard as it possibly could to promote the war in Vietnam (and Laos and Cambodia)--until Tet 1968, of course, when the consensus finally changed. As for Colby, it is even more ludicrous to take such a man at his word.

Furthermore, as I've said, according to Chomsky, whose scholarship I trust, even if I disagree with his conclusions, the source of the radically changed intelligence consensus after the assassination, which led to the reversal of the withdrawal policy, was specifically CIA.

So it's not all that hard, even 33 years after Gen. Smith's revealing comment, to know where the shit bucket is. Maybe Smith was being overly cautious. Maybe they figure there's no need to go to too much trouble hiding it, people are so used to the stench.

Sincerely,

Michael Morrissey

Newman did not reply. Of the dozen or so other COPA board members I sent copies to (e.g., John Judge, Peter Scott), only Michael Parenti replied, as follows: